

THOREAU AND HIS IMAGERY:  
THE ANATOMY OF AN IMAGINATION  
by Richard C. Cook

The character of a writer's poetic imagination can be successfully estimated from an intensive study of his imagery provided a) that a large number of images are examined from at least one significant work and b) that the following idea is accepted as being valid: "... the imagery a writer instinctively uses is ... a revelation, largely unconscious, given at a moment of heightened feeling, of the furniture of his mind ..."<sup>1</sup> Walden is the significant work, and the special definition of "image" required in an analytical display of imagery is as follows: an "image" shall comprise only a comparison, or the figurative use of language as evinced in simile or metaphor. (The definition specifically excludes the image as a "mental picture" or sensory picture alone.) "Imagery" hence covers both metaphor and simile, indicates their fundamental identity, suggests their comprehensive, organic effects of heightened imagination and emotion. Using this definition, and basing his study on a tabulation of images, the investigator may explore the two facets of Thoreau's imagination which immediately suggest themselves.

Image-assortment may 1) reveal those particular aspects of things seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled which most attracted Thoreau and were by him most fully and vividly recorded in his imagery, and 2) indicate from what areas of knowledge Thoreau derived the content, the stuff, of his images. Conclusions drawn from classifying images according to sensory appeal and possible source may be valid and enlightening if it be understood that imagery is drawn from a fund of knowledge based on past experience. These facets of experience, therefore, which Thoreau consciously or unconsciously retained and intensified by using them in comparisons, shall imply the make-up of Thoreau's imagination. What kind of knowledge, then, remained in Thoreau's memory? To what degree did sense perception aid in fixing this knowledge in his memory?

Nearly two-fifths of Thoreau's imagery in Walden involves nature. Of the larger aspects of nature, weather, water, sky and celestial bodies, land and natural features, and the seasons (includes night and day) interested Thoreau in that (descending) order. He knows weather. The self-styled "Inspector of Snowstorms" used snow and rain in his imagery; the wind reminded him of objects both seen and heard; mists and fogs he associated with a vague evil, with a sense of isolation; he combined several elements of weather, as in

I am no more lonely than ... the  
south wind, or an April shower, or a  
January thaw ...<sup>2</sup>

Of the smaller aspects of nature -- trees, plants (as such), flowers, fruits, vegetables, farming, and gardening -- trees, more than any

other single growing thing, he loved. He seems to have been fondest of the metaphoric possibilities in a) the leaves and b) the structure of trees. He used leaves to describe motion; he compared the shape and structure of leaves to other natural phenomena, as in

Is not the hand a spreading palm leaf with its lobes and veins?<sup>3</sup> Oddly enough, Thoreau used an image involving flowers but once, and at that the usage seems so figurative and general as to be a literary cliché':

Chastity is the flowering of man ...<sup>4</sup>

Of the animal kingdom, birds, insects, natural habitats, wild quadrupeds, fish, and reptiles are used in his imagery in that (descending) order. It is not surprising, knowing that he read ornithology as much as he did and that he made it a habit to record carefully the activities of local birds, for the investigator to find that there are more images in Walden that involve birds than of any other single phenomenon -- including weather -- in the whole of Thoreau's nature imagery. His bird imagery includes references to hawks, cowbirds, swallows, partridges, ducks, and loons. While there are 23 images involving birds, there are but two images involving fish. This finding is somewhat puzzling, as the argument that fish are smaller and thereby harder to detect than birds or quadrupeds is not valid -- not valid because insects occupy a place second only to that of birds in all of Thoreau's nature observations.

More of Thoreau's domestic images in Walden appear to have been derived from observation of activities and objects within the house than from without. Notable subjects of these "indoor" images are ribbons, table implements, mirrors, almanacs, and burning-glasses. Thorough knowledge of domestic trappings is seen in this image:



"Why can't you lead a life of quiet desperation, like everybody else?"

Drawing by Hoff

© 1959 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

Walden is . . . a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush, -- this the light dust-cloth . . . .

No other single subject, not weather, birds, or indoor images, attracted Thoreau's poetic imagination as did the body and bodily actions. He seems to have been extraordinarily conscious of the metaphorical possibilities of the body, and especially of the face. He likened locomotives, ponds, and even the earth to a face or a facial part. The composition of the body, innards, bodily disorders, and the nourishment of the body all play a substantial role in Thoreau's imagery of the body. The following image is typical of his interest in the body and bodily functions:

of sand As it flows it takes the form  
of leopard's paws or birds' feet, of  
brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all  
kinds.

Of the relatively few images in Walden which derive from a knowledge of music, architecture, drama, or the visual and decorative, the most specific emotion Thoreau seems to have experienced within the realm of art is an emotion about music. And his music imagery, not surprisingly, is entirely concerned with relating natural sounds to music. He could not escape the feeling that music is voiced -- not voiceless -- communication, and that music was the sound of universal laws promulgated.

A number of images devolve from observation of man-in-society, or civilized life. In profusion are found images involving classes, types, professions, buildings, ships, and sea-faring. Less evident, although in sufficient number to indicate Thoreau's broad range of imaginative interests, are images of trades, village life, war, money, sports, games, and government.

The non-empirically derived images in Walden break into three equal groups: the classics, scientific references, and all other, smaller categories, such as geography, history, superstition, proverbial and popular sayings, religion, and literature. Of the classic writers, the Greeks attracted Thoreau more than did the Romans. And of the Greeks, Homer was his favorite, as Homer wrote the work Thoreau loved best -- the Iliad. The scientific terminology that abounds in Thoreau's imagery derives from his knowledge of mathematics, geology, chemistry, astronomy, botany, and anatomy. The biological sciences are especially prevalent in Thoreau's imagery.

The distribution of the images shows that Thoreau was far from being the crusty hermit the easy reader of Walden believes him to be. For a book purporting to be an account of a two-year retreat to the Concord woods, it is interesting to note that in Walden there are more images concerning 1) ships and sea-faring than land and natural features, 2) buildings than seasons, 3) music than vegetables, 4) war than fish, 5) jewels than farming, and 6) there are more images concerned with money than with gardening. Much about Thoreau is paradoxical.

Although the determination of the sensory appeal of Thoreau's images is necessarily subjective, the proportions are likely to remain constant. In descending order of frequency, then, the writer noted the following arrangement: 1) sight (form), 2) sound, 3) sight (color), 4) touch (thermal), 5) taste, 6) touch (kinaesthetic), 7) scent, and 8) touch (simple tactual).

The shape Thoreau reacted to most strongly was the circle. He used the color green for metaphorical purposes far more than any other color. Black, white, gold, and silver follow in descending order. The sounds of nature he likened to music, military sounds, and other sounds of nature. Only a few highly-figurative (versus taste-to-taste) images of taste were found, and only two images involving scent. Thoreau did have, however, a highly-developed sense of thermal touch -- the images indicate he was very much aware of comfortable conditions and heat change, an awareness heightened no doubt by his frequent exposure to the capricious New England weather.

The sensory appeal of Thoreau's images in Walden, when analyzed, says much about his temperament and innate sensory capacities. By training his sight and hearing -- because by doing so he increased his potential absorption of natural phenomena -- Thoreau made those senses acute not only to his experiences with nature, but also to the every-day world of village life. As a gourmet makes subtle his palate, so also did Thoreau im-

prove the prime tools of his trade of naturalist. Touch, taste, and scent were of less value, and he ignored them progressively in that order. He reacted most strongly towards the shape and colors of objects, and to sounds and silences. The bulk of his images reveals fresh and abundant evidence of sensory perceptions. In his search for the specific, concrete, and precise expression of the sensation, Thoreau remained largely within his physical experience, and that which stuck in his imagination was that to which he was sensitive.

One of the values of image-analysis is a further knowledge of the man himself. For when, in febrile creation, a writer seeks an original comparison in order to get precise definition of thought, emotion, or sensation, he will use material that has stuck hard in his own mind, that for some peculiar reason he has not forgotten, that has formed its own niche in his psyche. He will use such material -- the objects he knows best, or thinks most about -- simply because a superficial or second-hand comparison will not advance him towards the reality he consciously or unconsciously seeks, towards that combination of experience and imagination which, when fused, results in creation. Hence, examining imagery reveals the composition of the poetic imagination, and by implication this composition reveals what the man loved, ignored, was sensitive to, knew best, and thought most about.

The most significant value of displaying the images in Walden, however, lies in the very revelation of those facets of Thoreau's physical and vicarious experiences that his mind garnered, sorted, and intensified in the heat of having to find (for him) an absolutely true similarity between dissimilars, of having to select certain remembrances in order to get at a precise statement of reality. What makes the revelation fascinating is the enormous choice of sensations, emotions, and thoughts Thoreau had. He chose from every kind of experience; at thirty he wrote:

I am a schoolmaster, a private tutor, a Surveyor, a Gardener, a Farmer, a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day laborer, a Pencil-maker, a Glass-paper-maker, a Writer and sometimes a Poetaster...



My steadiest employment is to keep myself at the top of my condition. In analysing the images in Walden, the writer has attempted to lay bare some of the artistic workings of this employment. To observe the richness, the variety, the originality of Thoreau's poetic imagination is both pleasurable and instructive. For no other American writer has written so powerfully and originally about man's need to arm himself against his self-made outrageous fortunes, and his equal need to find and pluck, the edelweiss.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery (New York: MacMillan Co., 1936), p. 4

<sup>2</sup>Henry David Thoreau, Walden, Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), p. 124. All references to Walden will be to this edition.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 274

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 197

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 170

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 272

<sup>7</sup>Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1939), p. 301. This article is a condensed version of a Master's Thesis (August, 1959), entitled, "Henry Thoreau's Poetic Imagination: An Analysis of the Imagery in Walden."

Orono, Maine

#### THE ANNUAL MEETING . . .

The 1960 annual meeting of the Thoreau Society will be held on Saturday, July 9th in Concord, Mass. Speaker of the day will be Professor Perry Miller of Harvard University, author of CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONCORD, THE AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISTS, THE RAVEN AND THE WHALE, and many other studies of nineteenth-century American Literature. His topic will be "Thoreau in the Context of International Romanticism." Another feature of the program will be an address by the president, Paul Oehser of the Smithsonian Institute.

#### THE SAVE WALDEN COMMITTEE . . .

The Save Walden Committee, acting for the Thoreau Society, is still short of its goal for legal expenses. A small contribution from each member will put us over the top. The appeal case is now scheduled to be tried before the higher court in March.

The latest endorser of the Save Walden Committee drive is Sterling North, syndicated book columnist and author of the recent THOREAU OF WALDEN POND. TWO BOOKLETS AND A DIRECTORY. . .

Mailed with Bulletin 69 was Booklet 14, "Two Forgotten Bits of Thoreauviana." The printing of this booklet was a gift to the society by Mr. Michael J. Kelly of New York City.

Enclosed with Bulletin 70 is Booklet 15, J. Lyndon Shanley's "Pleasures of Walden," his presidential address at our annual meeting last July, reprinted from the Northwestern University magazine Tri-Quarterly. (Booklet 15 was inadvertently mislabeled Bulletin 15 by the printer.) The cost of printing this

booklet was covered by the life memberships of Professor Perry Miller, Cambridge, Mass.; Mr. Richard S. Smith of Framingham, Mass.; and Professor Robert C. Cosbey of Chicago, Ill.

Also enclosed with this bulletin is a directory of our members. We published two such directories some ten or fifteen years ago and then gave up the practice because unfortunately they were used as mailing lists without the society's permission. In recent years there have been frequent requests for a new directory and so we are trying it once again. Remember -- this directory must not be used as a mailing list without specific permission in writing from the officers of the society. The cost of printing this directory was covered by the life memberships of Mr. Russell Harris of New London, Conn., and Mrs. Dudley A. Williams of Bristol, R.I.

The cost of printing Bulletin 70 was covered by the life memberships of Professor Harold W. Blodgett of Schenectady, New York, and Mr. Bradford Williams of Needham, Mass. C.P. SNOW AND THOREAU . . . WH

Of all contemporary English novelists, our decided favorite is C.P. Snow. So when J.A. Harrison of Leeds, England, wrote us that Snow had mentioned Thoreau in a recent lecture for the BBC, we were encouraged to write to him and ask him his opinion of Thoreau. We were delighted to receive the following reply:

November 19 / 59

Dear Mr. Harding

How very nice of you to write as you did! . . .

I'm afraid my actual published reference to Thoreau is of a negative nature. I said in the Rede lecture that most of the greatest writers of the past 100 years--and I mentioned Carlyle, Ruskin, Thoreau, D.H. Lawrence & one or two more--didn't comprehend the socially hopeful aspects of the industrial revolution.

But Thoreau was, of course, a writer with a vein of genius. He has that curious kind of fascinatingness which seems to belong to those writers whose personality is greater than their actual achievement. Walden is a magical book--but Thoreau attracts us over & beyond Walden. Recently, for example, I was staying for 3 days in Harvard. The days were very crowded, with almost every hour booked up, but I insisted on doing what I hadn't been able to do last time I was in Harvard and pay a pious visit to Walden Pond.

Yours sincerely  
C P Snow

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- The Thoreau Society, Inc., is an informal organization of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Its bulletins are issued quarterly; its booklets, occasionally. Annual meetings are held at Concord each July. Officers of the society are Paul Oehser, Washington, D.C., president; Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass., vice-president; and Walter Harding, secretary-treasurer. Annual membership is one dollar; sustaining membership, two to twenty-four dollars; life membership, twenty-five dollars. Communications concerning membership or publications should be addressed to the secretary: Walter Harding, State University College of Education, Geneseo, N.Y.